

Address by Ash Leighton Plom for Sunday, March 13th 2022

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!"

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your tender heart to gather us. Help us now as we gather to attend to your Word and prepare for your Sacrament, by your Spirit. Amen.

Good morning, friends, and for anyone new, my name's Ash.

I want to preach especially from the Genesis reading we had this morning, as this is key stuff for grasping God's work in the world and our lives. I know Genesis can be like a distant text for some of us, but it seems especially appropriate to give time to it today, as it's about a family's journey across a dangerous land, and about the personal promises from God speaking into their specific situation. So, let's get into God's word in Genesis, and make links especially as we cross the wild desert of Lent together this year.

Firstly, our Genesis reading started with the words, "*After these things*", which requires a quick summary for context. Abram had been introduced three short chapters earlier, in Genesis 12 – when God spoke to him and gave him a call and a promise - in his case namely to a Land, and that he would have many heirs. The specificity of these aren't meant to alienate us, but conversely reassure us that the God of the universe is also a God of personal promise in individuals' situations: as he was to Abram, so he can be for you.

Genesis 13 and 14, then, show that Abram was *open* to receive God's promise, *responding* to his call by leaving everything he knew behind, even though this must have been terrifying, but he *trusted* that God would be faithful in turn and fulfil his promises. I taught on this story to Key Stage 1 at St David's Primary this week, and we identified that as well as feeling sad about what he was leaving behind and scared about the journey, Abram could also have been feeling excited and hopeful about what lay ahead.

Later in Genesis, God changes Abram's name to Abraham, which means "father of many nations", to connect with the promise. The addition of the "h" sound also symbolises the breath of God – or Spirit of God – breathing into Abraham's life (think of the "h" sounds in God's name "Jehovah" or "Yahweh"). The Spirit of God in his life transforms Abraham's situation.

Abraham is therefore one of the most important figures in both the Old Testament and the New. The Old Testament establishes that he's the father of the Jewish people, and St Matthew's Genealogy List names Jesus as a descendent of Abraham (Matt 1:17), but the New Testament also calls Abraham the father of Christians as well. For example, in St Luke's Gospel, we are called children of Abraham (Luke

13:16, Luke 19:9) and are given the promise that he will be there to meet us when we die (Luke 16:22).

New Testament authors offer significant commentaries on Abraham's life, including a powerful speech by St Stephen recorded in Acts (chapter 7), and exegesis in epistles like Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. If you're looking for Lenten reading, why not open Acts, Romans, Galatians, or Hebrews this week and explore more about Abraham's faith? I'd love to hear how you get on. A common point stands out in all of them: Abram set out in faith, trusting God enough to leave everything he knew, and God accounted this faith to him as righteousness.

That's some of the context for Genesis as background to that phrase "After these things": God called Abram to a new land, promising him many descendants, and Abram faithfully set off. So we come to the section our reading covered this morning.

Next, God said: "Do not be afraid" (v.1). I cherish that. God has called, Abram has responded, but God acknowledges that even with Abram's faithfulness, he may have fears to allay! So, even if we have faith, we may have fears to allay – the two aren't opposites which can't exist in the same heart. If you're feeling fearful at this time, don't think it means you lack faith – it's possible to have both simultaneously!

Abram and God have this prayer conversation where Abram is honest *with God* about his doubts and fears. I'm reminded of the time in St Mark's Gospel (9:24) when a man comes to Jesus asking for healing for his son, and says, "Lord, I believe, help me my unbelief", or "Lord I believe, help me believe more". This is about being willing to pray, to have some faith, while honestly saying to God that you have doubts and fears. It is commendable to *ask* God, "help me believe", "help me with my doubts", "help me with my fears". We don't have to hide them or suppress them. We can take them to God and ask for his help. God cares for anxious hearts: just as he calms Abram and breathes into his life, he longs to comfort our souls, if we ask him.

What's really awesome to reiterate is God accepts Abram's faith as "righteousness" (Genesis 15:6) immediately *after* Abram had shared with God his doubts and fears (in Genesis 15:2)! What I'm saying is you don't need to have some sort of unassailable, unflinching, unswerving faith that never doubts or fears – Abram's model shows it is okay to bring your doubts and fears to God and ask him for his help with your faith.

What an enormous relief as we navigate the Lenten desert this year, with war in Europe weighing on our minds, an awful cost of living crisis already biting, let alone ongoing covid risks, and all the usual pain we carry in everyday life. We are not expected to face these by God with an absurd cheerfulness. Instead, we are invited to pray for God's help to allay our fears and dissolve our doubts.

In this moment, Abram becomes the archetype for being accepted by God through faith, not by doing good works, being good enough, or avoiding doing too many bad things, but just by faith, and even that tinged with fear and doubt.

In a moment we can respond to God with faith, even if it is faith mixed with fear and doubt right now, when we pray the creed together. Why not pray like Abraham today, however faltering you may feel – ask God for *more* faith, and let God receive your willingness to pray as righteousness. Because he desires to gather you beneath the softness of his wings, like a mother hen her chicks.